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ABSTRACT

Rules for selecting participants of games are the starting point for creating a just community among preschool-aged children. At first glance, it seems impossible to create a just community among young children whose social perspective-taking is undifferentiated and egocentric, and whose sense of positive justice is similarly limited. However, preschool children do have a sense of the need to socially regulate the behavior of individuals in groups. This characteristic can be the basis for developing a just community among the very young. Preschool children playing games in which all members of a group can participate have to accept rules for playing the game and for finding and selecting players. Classroom teachers have an important role to play in transmitting selection rules to children in playgroups. Negative consequences may occur when a teacher's way of opening a game is demonstrably unfair. A segment of a teacher-student interaction regarding the selecting of players for a group game in a preschool setting is interpreted in order to illustrate problems of justice which arise in the preschool. (RH)

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Who will be the first?

Creating a Just Community in the Kindergarten

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The just community approach by Kohlberg (1984) an his collagues was mainly developed for schools. One of the main problems of the just community approach is the segmentation of accepting some rules inside the schools and not accepting them outside. So there is the question how to deal with this problem. I will argue that one way could be to create a just community as early as possible. That means to look out for an institution where for the first time children come together in a group. In most countries it is usually the kindergarten. In Germany, this is an institution for 3- to 6-year-old children, which has to be left when the children enter elementary school. The main aim of education in a German kindergarten is a social one: to foster children's social behavior and not to prepare them to be a good pupil. But the education doesn't neglect cognitive, affective or motoric aspects. They are all embedded in the social behavior. The first aim of - what we in Germany call - 'the curriculum of social learning' is to make the children competent for to cope with the problems which arise in new situations and - this must be emphasized - to be autonom in such situations. I think this characterization of the curriculm will be one good reason to start with the just community approach at the kindergarten.

A second reason will be a theoretical one. We all know that Piaget distinguishes two different kinds of social regulations for developing heteronomous and autonomous moral judgment: the authority of the parents and the reciprocity of the peer group. The kindergarten can be understood as a transition from the first one to the latter one: a first step into the peer group.

But we also have to ask what the prerequisites are for creating a just community with pre-schoolers. I will give a brief description of some

important social-cognitive abilities of young children as described by Robert Selman (1980) and William Damon (1977).

Selman's level 0 of social perspective taking is an undifferenciated and egocentric one. The young child can not clearly distinguish between physical and psychological aspects of persons. The self and the other are only physical identities and not psychological ones. The concept of friendship - an important aspect for our issue - is oriented to the playmate at the moment. So the solution of conflicts goes two ways: to break off the interaction or to use physical power. Also the concept of peer group is a physical one: the group is a group because the children play together. The group is defined by situational aspects.

Damon's level 0 of positive justice is described by similar issues. Positive justice means to choose what the subject wants to do ("I should get it because I want to have it") and - a little bit more developed - to justify external realities as size, sex or other physical characteristics of persons. I will add the concept of children's reasoning about social regulations because it is an important one to create a just community with such young children. They are also - just like the fiendship and the peer group concept - bounded by specific modes of behaviour. Social rules or conventions are seen as momentary regularities that may be followed or ignored of will.

At first glance it seems impossible to create a just community with preschoolers who have such prerequisites. But I think there are also two arguments against it: the first one emphasizes the difference between the awareness of a concept and the praxis just as Piaget mentioned it. There are good reasons and much experience made in groups of young children

that they have a sense of the necessity of social regulations in a group and a sense of taking care of each other. And if there is a possibility to force the social perspective the just community approach will be an important one.

So let us take a look at the pedagogical problems of creating a just community at the kindergarten. I will point out only one issue: Games, which are initiated by the teacher. A lot of time at the kindergarten the preschoolers spend to play games just like the moral musical chair. I am not talking about games which are played by some children but of such games that all children could play together. Those games are often offered by the teacher and she asks the children whether they like them or not. But this is the crucial point I want to stress.

Games are not only constituted by rules but the rule for looking for participants and selecting them is also important. Normally the interested participants come to terms about this rule, or a given rule is accepted. At the kindergarten the children for the fist time are confronted with the situation not to be the only one who wants to participate in a game. So they have to accept the selecting rules. And the teacher plays an important role in transmitting the rules to the kindergarten group.

I will give an example of what consequences may follow if the way of opening a game is an unfair one. It is the crucial point of answering the question 'Who will be the first?'. It is a transcript of an original meeting in a kindergarten group which has been videotaped. The teacher offers a play which we call in translation "We are travelling by the railway". One role is the conductor, another important one is the locomotive. The latter is driving in a circle and is asking a further child to be the

tender, the dining-car and so on. And the conductor always gives the signal to start or to stop.

So I will try to do a brief interpretation of what happens in this interaction. (Note 1)

Transcription

1 Teacher (to the children): Do you want to play the game again: "We are travelling by train:"?
2 Fabian: Yeah-yeah-yeah (very loud)
Children: Yeah-Yeah
3 Teacher: Fabian, I can hardly hear you today, because your voice is too low.
4 Fabian: But I want to be the conductor
5 Teacher (to the children): Who wants to be the conductor?
6 Fabian: I-I-I. I have been the first. (loudly)
7 Teacher: Susan, do you want to start?
8 Fabian (to the Teacher): I have been the first.
9 Teacher: Fabian!
10 Fabian: I want to be the locomotive
11 Teacher: Susan, do you want to start: You are the locomotive?
12 Fabian: I have been the first!
13 Teacher (to Susan): You know the game. You are singing and you are the locomotive and you are driving in the circle.
14 Fabian (to the Teacher): You-you I have been the first who wants to be the locomotive.
15 Teacher: Well, Fabian, I have thought about it. Today I want to start with Susan. She has never been the first in a game.

Interpretation

With the first question (1) the teacher doesn't want to offer or lay befo-

re a concrete game but offers the repetition of an already played game. Thus the children can only agree or disagree. They can hardly propose any games themselves. As she says 'again' we can assume that the game has just been played before. So the idea of playing this game doesn't come from the children but from the teacher. So the offer could be interpreted as a 'stop gap', as it is not wished by the children or as the teacher has no new idea of what to play next. Furthermore we have to assume that the rules of the game are known by the children of the group as they are taken for granted as well as the knowledge of the rules of selecting the participants.

The children answer 'yes' (2) to the question of the teacher. Fabian (2) appears especially loud and ist the first one to point up. We could suppose that in this way he wants to claim the first part that is needed in this game. The teacher reacts (3) with an ironical remark, telling him that he has always been a very quite boy. On the one hand an ironical remark towards children is not fair, as they can hardly understand it and have no possibility of reply. On the other hand the remark presupposes that Fabian does claim a role. But she doesn't explain the rules of choosing play-fellows.

There upon Fabian directly claims a part in the game to play (4). So the first interpretation of Fabian's reaction (in (2)) has come true. Thus the rule of selecting participants would be that the one who shouts loudest as the first one, gets the part. His inserted 'but' makes us think that he understood the teacher's reaction as an exclusion in the selection of the participants. Now it is the teacher's job either to accept his interest or to correct his interpretation of the situation and to refer to the selection rules.

In remark 5 the teacher asks the children as a whole who wants to take the first part (conductor). Thus she ignores Fabian's claim. Thereby she shows him that she is the one who distributes the parts. But as she doesn't give specific or explicit rules of selecting and generally asks, she offers Fabian the possibility to point up again. Now her way of asking could let us conclude two rules of selecting: she wants to see who is willing to take a part and then decides who will get it; or she follows the rule who points up first gets the part. This ist how Fabian unterstands her question (6), he claims that he pointed up first and so it is his turn to play. While the teacher turns to another child (7) she once more ignores his protest. So she shows her way of choosing play-fellows: she decides who is to play.

Now it is Fabian's turn to repeat his claim (8). The teacher admonishes him for that (9). She still did not unterstand that there is a misunderstanding between him and her according the selection rules. She does not want to take him but as he is quite insisting she can do nothing but either ignore him or admonish him. As Susan has beeing chosen for the part of the conductor Fabian can do nothing in his persistens but to claim the next part (the locomotive (10)). Thus he expects the possibility to finally join in the game. Now the teacher has to request Susan to join in (11) even so Fabian would really be willing to play. Thereby you can see that her way of selecting supports one special child. To deny Fabian the part of the locomotive as well she offers Susan that part. So she succeeded once more in leaving out Fabian. Hence he complaines about having claimed that part first (12). Once more the teacher is not able to clear up the missunderstanding or to explain selection rules. She ignores Fabian furthermore and now has to explain the game, which had seemed to be

known due to the form of her first offer, to Susan (13).

As Fabian calls her intention to his claim (14) she reacts with a strategy of avoiding (15). She explains her decision for Susan by saying that she wanted to start with Susan that day, as Susan had never been first before. Thus she contradicts her own opening of the game when she had asked for play-fellows. So she succeeded in leaving out Fabian completely and not explaining the rules of selecting play-fellows. Fabian has nothing left but feeling that he has been treated unfairly.

Through the interpretation has become evident that problems with justice already arise at the kindergarten. Problems which have to be solved proberly. In this example the teacher did not succeeded in doing so. Yet it would be very easy to explain the selection rules to the children. If the understanding of rules, the observants of them and a critical distance to them are a central element of justice, the chance of rising a consciousness of the importance of justice and rules in the children has been spoiled. This interpretation makes evident that every starting question in a game includes or imputes certain rules of selection.

What could the teacher do better? We must find a way which is a fair one. For our example it would be better to explain to the children that she wants to prefer one child or a group of children, for example the younger ones. the youngest, a child who never got the chance to start and so on. This would be a fair way because the children can understand it and it is the thruth.

Another way is to let the children chose their own way. The experience I have made shows that they are able to do it. The children can talk about

such rules. But we have to respect that such rules are oriented at their level of thinking, as Selman and Damon had discovered. The teacher can also offer some new rules but they must be explained.

So what I wanted to point out is that the just community approach at the kindergarten can start. If children are kept unfair in the way of selecting the participants of a game they will never learn what it means to have rules in a group. It is very important to come to terms about the selection of rules with the children together. Then they can feel responsible for the rules and they will have a feeling for the necessity of having rules. And I think that the preschoolers will understand the importance of rules although they seem not be able to have a consciousness of rules and concepts as I mentioned before.

In summary, the kindergarten could be an important institution for to start and to create the just community approach. But we have to consider that there are many difficulties; for example the restrictions of social-cognitive abilities of the children and of the pedagogical interactions between the teacher and the children as I have mentioned it. I see the rules for selecting the participants of a game as the starting point for creating a just community at the Kindergarten.

Note

(1) A detailed and exhaustive description of the way of interpretation what I call 'reconstructive hermeneutics' is published in Aufenanger,St./ Lenssen,M.(Eds.): Handlung und Sinnstruktur. München 1986 (Kindt) and in Garz,D.: Are there good schools out there? A hermeneutic inquiry. Paper presented at AERA 1987 in Washington/USA.

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